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# QUESTION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF ALL PERSONS SUBJECTED TO ANY FORM OF DETENTION OR IMPRISONMENT, IN PARTICULAR:

## QUESTION OF ENFORCED OR INVOLUNTARY DISAPPEARANCES

Written statement submitted by the International Association Against Torture, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[21 December 1990]

## FORCED DISAPPEARANCE IN HONDURAS: EFFECTS ON THE FAMILIES

1. The International Association Against Torture (AICT) believes that the word "torture" applies to all the victims of a repressive policy. In the case of forced disappearances, this must include the family members of the disappeared, who suffer physically and mentally years after the disappearance. To illustrate this point, we submit the following preliminary report on the health of families of the disappeared in Honduras. The information presented here is the result of a scientific study initiated by the AICT, in conjunction with the Committee of Families of Detained-Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH).

2. To date, there are 113 documented cases of forced or involuntary disappearances in Honduras. The policy of forced disappearance in Honduras was internationally exposed in 1988 when the Interamerican Court of Human Rights meeting in Costa Rica found the Government guilty in the disappearances of two Honduran citizens, Angel Manfredo Velasquez Rodriguez and Soul Godinez Cruz. Despite these rulings, however, the Honduran Government persists in denying responsibility and has not paid the families the indemnization requested by the Court.

3. Twenty-five families (136 persons) took part in the study. These 25 families represent one fourth of the approximately 100 families of the disappeared currently living in Honduras. The families were located in eight towns throughout the country and were visited in their homes by a North American doctor and Honduran assistant over a six-week period (September-October 1990). Relationships to the disappeared were varied and included mothers/fathers/wives, siblings, sons/daughters, nieces/nephews and cousins. The interviews were carried out in Spanish, and guided by a specially designed questionnaire. Information was obtained through self-report (usually through a family spokesperson) and direct observation. When possible, children were talked with directly. Families needed to be assured that their names would not be used in the report for fear of reprisals from the authorities.

### Stress-related disorders

4. A constellation of stress-induced disorders had been recognized by the American Psychiatric Association diagnostic manual as sequela of torture both for the direct victim and the family members. Often observed following natural disasters and war, the manual mentions torture as a causative factor, "the trauma may be learning about a serious threat or harm to a close friend or relative, e.g. that one's child has been kidnapped, tortured or killed," and "the disorder is apparently more severe and longer lasting when the stressor is of human design" (DSM-III-R, 1987). Table 1 shows the incidence of occurrence of these symptoms in the 25 families, as a percentage of total family members (percentage of total) and as a percentage of families that showed at least one example of the symptom (percentage of families). To be included, the symptoms had to have commenced subsequent to the disappearance and be currently present.

Table 1. Stress-related symptoms

| Symptom | Number of cases | Percentage of total persons | Percentage of families |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sleep disorders | 53 | 40 | 96 |
| dreams of DP */ | 28 | 20 | 80 |
| insomnia | 24 | 17 | 76 |
| nightmares, sleep walk/talk | 16 | 11 | 48 |
| depression in a.m. | 10 | 7 | 40 |
| Anxiety | 53 | 40 | 100 |
| chronic headaches | 33 | 24 | 92 |
| stomach aches | 16 | 11 | 48 |
| palpitations | 14 | 10 | 56 |
| diaphoresis | 13 | 9 | 48 |
| dry mouth | 12 | 9 | 44 |
| shortness of breath | 10 | 7 | 36 |
| chest pain | 6 | 4 | 24 |
| Nervous disorders (e.g. tremor) | 38 | 30 | 68 |
| Disorders of menstruation | 12 | 25 **/ | 48 **/ |
| Eating disorders | 5 | 4 | 20 |
| Psychosis requiring medication and/or institutionalization | 3 | 2 | 12 |

*/ DP = the disappeared.

**/ Menstruation disorders are calculated as percentage of females of menstruating age (n = 48), and families that contain at least one such female (n = 23).

5. All of the 25 families contained one or more members suffering from at least three of the above symptoms, and of the total 136 persons, 95 (70 per cent) suffered from at least one of the above. As is evident from table 1, sleep disorders and anxiety symptoms were prevalent, occurring in 40 per cent of individuals and 90 per cent and 100 per cent of families, respectively. In most instances, multiple anxiety symptoms were experienced simultaneously when the family member was reminded of the disappeared. This occurred frequently on anniversaries of the disappearance, birthdays, holidays and when people and items associated with the disappeared were encountered.

Children

6. Although the previous statistics include children, table 2 lists problems encountered only in children. There were 70 children 18 years of age and younger, in 22 of the 25 families.

Table 2. Children

| Symptom | Number of cases | Percentage of total persons | Percentage of families |
|---|---|---|---|
| All combined | 42 | 60 | 91 |
| pronounced fear (e.g. of dark) | 19 | 27 | 50 |
| angry outbursts, oversensitive | 15 | 21 | 25 |
| drop in scholastic performance | 14 | 20 | 64 |
| bed wetting | 11 | 16 | 32 |
| developmental delays | 4 | 8 */ | 22 */ |

*/ Developmental delay percentages were calculated as the percentage of children that were seven years old or younger at the time of the disappearance (n = 50), and families that had such children (n = 18).

7. Oversensitivity in the children was exhibited as rapid mood swings and unprovoked crying fits. Drops in scholastic performance were attributable to difficulty in concentration and in many instances the inability of the family to pay school related expenses (tuition, books, uniforms). This was especially acute in those families where the disappeared was the sole provider.

8. Emotional problems were also evident from the children's drawings. Children were provided with a set of colour pens and asked to draw their house and family. The 27 drawings collected from children of families of a disappeared were compared to 18 drawings collected at the same time from Honduran children of families from a similar economic class, but without a history of disappearance. The two groups differed significantly in measures indicating the child's perception of him or herself and the family (e.g. presence of danger signs, contextual cues, paths to house). In addition, many of the drawings from the disappeared were primitively executed suggesting developmental delays.

Fear and isolation

9. Stress in the families is exacerbated by the atmosphere of fear and isolation in which they live. While almost all the families indicated that the disappearance is common knowledge in their neighbourhood, 11/18 families (61 per cent) fear that their neighbours are police or police informers. Such a fear is not unreasonable in Honduras, where the armed forces use the public media to solicit informers to alert them of "suspicious-looking persons in the

neighbourhood". In addition, 14/22 families (64 per cent) have received threats from the authorities subsequent to the disappearance. Finally, a shocking 91 per cent of the families (21/23) fear that another member of the family will become disappeared in the future.

10. According to the Honduran Human Rights Commission, the use of forced disappearance peaked in the mid-1980s and has declined in recent years. This does not signal a retreat from repressive policies, however, because the number of extrajudicial executions during this period has increased. The average number of years since the disappearance for this group of families was 6.4. The presence of so many stress-related health problems so long after the event suggests that the families are suffering far beyond that to be expected from normal grieving. The manner in which the disappeared was taken, the hardships of living without them, and the atmosphere of fear and isolation from the community all contribute to prolonged stress disorders of the kind observed in these families. The Government of Honduras is bound by legal and moral authority to admit its culpability in the policy of forced disappearance and attend to the urgent needs of the families it has so greatly wronged.

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